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"Got to be Real:" Transgression as Transcendence in Late 20th Century Ball Culture

Following the release of *Paris Is Burning* (1990), a documentary directed by Jennie Livingston that explores New York City's ballroom community in the mid-to-late 1980s, there has been an increase in scholarship on the social significance of ballroom culture. Ballroom culture, also known as "ball" or "ball/house" culture, originated in New York City in the 1980s and refers to the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ subculture of drag queens who organized pageants and housing/family structures in response to the discrimination, violence, and displacement they experienced in daily life. Scholars such as Catherine Baker-Pitts and Darrell Martin have examined the shifting performances of identity in the ballroom to demonstrate the transgender understanding of the 'self' as existing in a perpetual state of becoming, reinvention, and transformation, while others such as Emily A. Arnold and Marlon M. Bailey have analyzed ball culture's house system to emphasize the positive effects of community building on individual wellness in the face of social injustice and illness, particularly HIV/AIDS. Diana Rowan, Denis D. Long, and Darrin Johnson expand on this idea, arguing that ball culture leverages shared experiences and group solidarity to establish a sense of acceptance, belonging, and validation that can be extended into broader aspects of a member's life. Evident, but not explicitly marked in the work of these scholars, are motifs of transcendence in ball culture.

Drawing on first-hand accounts of NYC's ball scene from Livingston's *Paris Is Burning,* alongside the gender and sexuality scholarship previously discussed, this paper examines ball culture as a sort of 'text' through a transcendental lens. By analyzing ballroom spaces, rituals, community structures, and the affective experience of the ball, it is evident that

transcendendental nature of NYC's ball culture enabled marginalized LGBTQ+ communities to transgress their bleak social circumstances, navigate convention-defying identities, and ultimately survive as individuals.

Although ballroom culture's roots extend back more than fifty years ago to the white drag runway shows hosted in and around the New York City area, this analysis regards the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ subculture popularized in Harlem in the late 1980s and early 1990s, often referred to as "ball" or "ball/house" culture. Ball culture can be characterized by two defining features: the ballroom and the house. The ballroom derives thematic origins from the African American tradition of engaging in cultural performance "to create an alternative world" contrasting structural reality (Arnold and Bailey 174). In the ballroom, members walk the runway in an elaborate performative fashion (with costumes, dances, and audiences) and compete in categories for trophies, cash prizes, social status, and most importantly, "bragging rights about winning in a particular category" (Rowan et al.183). The house system in ball culture is of equal importance to the ballroom. "Houses" refer to the primarily figurative, but sometimes literal, homes constructed by ball members to establish networks of social support and mitigate the precarity of life as marginalized, at-risk figures in wider society (Arnold and Bailey 174). Collectively, ballroom and house networks worked to create spaces of safe, free expression, affirmation, and community.

Ball culture reached new heights of engagement in the late 1980s amid a backdrop of racism, homophobia/transphobia, violence, economic insecurity, and illness within the LGBTQ+ community. Transgender people of colour faced especially challenging social circumstances, evident as Livingston's documentary opens with a blatant warning from a member of the ball community: "you have three strikes against you in this world…you're black and you're male and

you're gay. You're gonna have a hard fucking time" (*Paris is Burning*). Catherine Baker-Pitts and Darrell Martin refer to this situation as “double disavowal” from society and explain that trans people of colour existed at “lowermost rung of the social hierarchy, among rejected gay and gender-diverse folks” (207). The marginalized trans community endured systematic rejection by their families and the workforce, verbal and physical abuse in social life, and limited access to education, social and financial resources. Baker-Pitts and Martin note that the community navigated “survival sex work” and confronted “the potential for murder around every corner because of their visibility” (208). Additionally, the HIV/AIDS crisis complicated these circumstances, introducing new levels of anxiety and precarity, and “diminishing the future of ‘queer time’” (Baker-Pitts Martin 208). Not only did the community exist in a socially dire position, but a physically vulnerable one as well.

These grim conditions of reality, which threatened LGBTQ+ identity and culture, facilitated a relative social response. Lauren Berlant argues that the demanding conditions of life, as well as the social systems that one functions within, shape how a person imagines ideals of “competence, satisfaction, and happiness” (28). Furthermore, these conditions and systems shape “fantasy itself” (Berlant 29). In the context of the marginalized, LGBTQ+ community that regularly confronted discrimination, violence, and social outcast, the fantasy of acceptance and safety materialized in ball culture, which enabled an escape from harsh reality.

Through the Looking-Glass: Ballroom Spaces Conceptualized

Pushed to the outward margins of bustling city centres, ballrooms took place in “low-overhead” and desolate spaces such as parking lots, piers, abandoned buildings, and vacant warehouses. To stay “under the radar,” details about the event were circulated through a closed community and balls often began in the middle of the night. Ballrooms generally featured

runways, judges (often seated at a table), DJs, emcees/MCs, and lively audiences arranged depending on the location of the ball and type of competition (Rowan et al.183). Considering the unstable and socially isolating characteristics of the ballroom, it can be understood in terms of liminality. Liminality is defined as an "in-between position, either spatially or temporally" (Thomassen 40). In his discussion of rave culture, Bryan Rill highlights that liminality is achieved by separation from social structure, both "physically and psychically" (652). This is true of the ballroom, as it exists apart from the established zones and conventions of society. However, this is less so a matter of aesthetics than one of safety. Baker-Pitts and Martin refer to the concept of "object maps," defined zones of safety and danger, that "provide each of us—individually and collectively—not only with a sense of what we can safely do, think, and bear; but also, and most importantly, a sense of who we can be" (208). Away from social structure, the neglected piers and abandoned warehouses of NYC not only fostered a sense of safety and belonging, but an environment of free expression and uninhibited "being" for the ball community.

Additionally, the ballroom's separation from structural reality enabled the materialization of ideals and fantasies that could not be realized in the conventional social sphere. In this sense, the ballroom can be likened to Foucault's concept of "heterotopias:" sites of utopia and fantasy that are "effectively enacted," where "time is privileged over place" and space is "transitory," "absolutely temporal" (Ott & Herman 254). In the ballroom, the precarious nature of physical space highlights the significance of time/moment *as* space. Brian Ott and Bill Herman argue that by transforming a "physical place" into a "festive moment," an event can be liberated from the logic of social and cultural order (254). In viewing the ballroom as a moment rather than a space,

ball members move beyond systems of social order and engage with culturally unconventional ideologies, even if such fantasies are fleeting.

Opposing the harsh conditions of reality, the ballroom operated as a space of fantasy for ball members. Baker-Pitts and Martin characterize it as a hypothetical area "between inner and external reality" … "where the illusion of safety and creativity flourish" (207). In opposition to the transphobia, racism, and violence members experienced in daily life, the ballroom embraced ideals of unity and welcomed the expression of diverse identities. "It's like crossing into the looking glass in Wonderland," exclaims a trans woman walking into a ball in *Paris is Burning*. Considering the transitory potential of the ballroom, it can be thought of as a "Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)", a moment in which fantasy is materialized and "freedom of expression rules before external reality intervenes" (Rill 656). While balls exemplify a moment of enacted ideals and fantasies, they are not merely temporary salves. Rather, balls purport a "utopian vision for the future" (Rill 656), a means of existence that members and participants wish upon reality.

"Got to be Real:" Community, Shifting Identities, and Performance in the Ballroom

The ball community can be understood as a group of people with a shared longing for identification, validation, and kinship. As the outward expression of transgender identity often posed a threat to an individual's safety, the systematic repression of it proved to be equally detrimental. Baker-Pitts and Martin explain, "while it is a disaster to be found…it is at the same time disaster not to be found, not to be recognized" (207). However, ball culture mitigated the Black and Latinx transgender community's "double disavowal" from society by creating a space for recognition, "face-to-face relationships," "aid for self-help," and "shared experiences and identity" (Rowan et al. 183). One member of the ball community explains, "you go in there and

you feel a hundred percent right as being gay. And that's not what it's like in the world." Another states, "somebody else is there in your corner, at your side to say, Yeah, you can do it. You're gonna be fine" (*Paris is Burning*). By celebrating racial and gender diversity, enabling free expression of identity, and practices of mutual support, ball culture conveys strength in community.

Moreover, "communitas" and the symbol of "Unity and Diversity (UAD)" are defining features of ball culture. As discussed by Rill, Victor Turner's "communitas" can be characterized by "a moment "in and out of time," where youth gather to express themselves and enjoy freedom from social structure" and UAD by "open-mindedness," "freedom of expression," and "sharing" (Rill 649). These values and symbols are upheld by the ball community to celebrate and protect their transgender identity, as "communitas does not merge identities, rather it safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness" (Schechner 71). In practices such as shouting a member's house name while they are walking the runway or embracing diverse expressions of gender and status, the ballroom empowers members to feel sovereign among a community of their like-minded peers.

Another facet of "communitas" in ball culture involves the breakdown of conventional social structures and the "homogenization of status" (Thomassen 47). Liberated from the socio-cultural classifications of gender and status in society, which did not account for LGBTQ+ identities, the ballroom provided members with the "freedom to be different," and "to 'other' one's self in collusion with others" (Rill 656). For example, walking the categories of the ball involved aesthetically mastering the roles of spaces that typically denied trans people of colour entry, such as "modeling agencies, exclusive clubs, fancy schools, and corporate jobs" (Baker-Pitts and Martin 208). The legendary femme queen Dorian Corey explains, "In a ballroom, you

can be anything you want. You're not really an executive, but you're looking like an executive, and therefore you're showing the straight world that "I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity…because I can look it." Your peers, your friends are telling you, "Oh, you'd make a wonderful executive" And that is like a fulfillment" (*Paris is Burning*). Often, the luxury and opulence of ball categories starkly contrasted the "marginalized life in poverty…experienced by many participants" (Rowan et al.188). However, the dissolution of structure in the ballroom enabled members to transgress their social circumstances and embody roles/identities that were realistically beyond their reach.

This shifting embodiment of identity in the ballroom can be understood by examining transgender identity through the lens of liminality. "Trans" is not only a physical state of being, but it is a perspective, a way of viewing identity as in a constant state of "becoming, of reinvention and transformation" (Baker-Pitts and Martin 215). In this sense, transgender identity is liminal as it exemplifies the condition of "in-betweenness," and likewise, the practice of performing categorical identities in ball culture can be analyzed as liminal rituals on Turner's terms as well. Schechner explains that in liminal rituals, the individual leaves the conventional world and enters "a time-place where they are not-this-not-that, neither here nor there, in the midst of a journey from one social self to another" (66). This sentiment is true of transformations and performances in the ballroom, as one member claims, "everybody changed at night ... you could see somebody on a regular day and they just be in jeans and T-shirt and then that night they're like a total different person" (Arnold and Bailey 177). In this shifting performance of identity in the ballroom, members achieve a state of liminality, through which they depart from their realistic circumstances and embody an ideal for a moment in time; they are neither their true selves nor are they someone else. This ball ritual allowed members to transgress boundaries

of gender and to "discover missing gendered self-states that were too easily given up" (Baker-Pitts and Martin 215).

Over the course of a ball, a member may walk the runway and embody several different personas. Diana Rowan et al. note a "tremendous focus on bending gender roles," conceptions of social class, and status (188). For example, runway categories include "high-fashion winter sportswear," "the Poconos versus the Catskills," "going to school," "town and country," "executive realness," "high fashion Parisian," and "the military scene" (*Paris is Burning*). Identity is continually defined and redefined on the runway, as members perform various self-representations based on social interactions within and beyond the ballroom scene. Schechner refers to performance that has been practiced and rehearsed as "restored behaviours" or "twice performed behaviours," referring to the recombination of behaviour that has already been behaved, learned, or invented (28). He argues that in performance, actors are invoking "restored behaviours" and may experience being beside oneself, not oneself, or "taken over as in trance" (Schechner 34). From Schechner's perspective, members of the ball community who walk categories can be understood as performing "restored behaviours," engaging with multiple versions of themselves, and entering a trance-like state of being.

Moreover, in the performance of restored behaviour is the possibility of transcending. Although there are some elements of parody and burlesque in walking the ball, the sentiment is more aligned with "embodiment" in performance. In his discussion of rave culture, Rill conceptualizes the "embodied ideal" as an ideological fantasy that exists beyond the theoretical realm. He argues that "it has a sensual counterpart, and when we humans feel something that touches us deeply, it adds a tremendous meaning to the experience (Rill 652). This is true of

performance in the ballroom, where the goal is not only to engage with a theoretically ideal identity, but to physically enact and embody it.

The concept of "realness" in ball culture exemplifies this idea and refers to "playing the role down to the smallest detail" (Rowan et al. 185). In runway competition, realness is often assessed based on looking as much as possible like one's straight counterpart. For example, the category of "Femme Queen realness" requires trans women to mask any features remotely perceived as masculine and appear as straight women (Rowan et al. 185). Realness in the ballroom represents a physical embodiment of social ideals, while also serving a pragmatic purpose. Pepper LaBeija clarifies, "It's not a takeoff or a satire. No. It's actually being able to be this… When they're undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom, into the sunlight and onto the subway, and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the Femme Realness Queens" (*Paris is Burning*). For members of the ball community, walking the runway is more than just pretending. Schechner argues that performers practice behaviours to temporarily "leave themselves" and "be fully "in" whatever they are performing" (72). Within and beyond the ball, members temporarily transport from themselves and inhabit an in-between state: a "place between "not me . . . not not me" (Schechner 72). For LGBTQ+ individuals facing discrimination and violence, performance (particularly the performance of realness) is an integral part of survival, serving as camouflage practice for safely existing in society at large.

"I'll House You:" Family, Community, and Wellness in Ball House Culture

Although the ballroom promoted the dissolution of conventional identity structures and gender norms, this is not to assume that order was absent in ball culture. In fact, ball culture is highly structured, i.e., imposing strict rules in competition, social hierarchies, and systems of

living outside the ballroom. Ott and Herman note that “regardless of how decentered and disorderly underground rave culture may outwardly appear, it nevertheless obeys certain "rules of disorder" through the construction of cultural norms” (264). Ball culture exemplifies this notion, establishing its own structures in contrast to those that oppress and isolate members in typical social life.

Ball culture is also known as “ball/house” culture, representing the houses and familial structures that members organized amidst social and cultural persecution. As aforementioned, “houses” are primarily figurative, but literal homes where members live together exist within the community as well. Houses are usually named after famous designers or legendary ball members, such as the house of Saint Laurent or the house of Xtravaganza. Conforming to heteronormative gender roles, houses were generally made up of “mothers,” who performed duties such as cooking, cleaning, nurturing, “fathers,” who provided financial support, upheld house reputation, and mentored house members, and “children,” younger members new to the ball scene (Arnold and Bailey 180). As mothers and fathers were generally experienced, legendary ball members, they imparted their knowledge and values onto the children of the house. Together, household members installed a system which allowed them to “recast their lives and families in the midst of rejection and marginalization from their biological kin…and society at large” (Arnold and Bailey 178).

For ball members, this movement from a position of isolation into a community structure can be understood as a form of transcendence. A member of the house of Xtravaganza argues, “This is a new meaning of family. It's a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond” (*Paris is Burning*). Members of the house mark a significant shift, initiated by newfound kinship and social support, which can be likened to Abraham Maslow’s definition of transcendence

pertaining to becoming "one of the family rather than an orphan." Maslow emphasizes a "sense of belongingness, of having a place" contrasting with the "sense of ostracism, isolation, aloneness, of rejection, of not having any roots, of belonging no place in particular" (64). House structures transform ball members' sense of place in the world, and in doing so, allow them to transgress their former circumstances of isolation and persecution and achieve a state of security. Ultimately, the house functions in favour of community and individual wellness.

Colleen Derkatch argues that the rhetoric of wellness is twofold, relying on the logic of "restoration and enhancement" to perpetuate itself (134). Ball culture's house system exemplifies this notion, as members work collectively to mend and better each other's lives. "Restoration," refers to the act of seeking wellness to restore oneself to previous states of health (Derkatch 134). In houses, the logic of restoration can be understood in terms of restoring members' former states of bodily health, i.e., nourishment, physical aid, shelter/safety, and former states of mental health, i.e., emotional stability, social security, affective relationships. For example, house structures work to mitigate members' personal and social crises. A member of the Dupree house explains that ball children come from "broken homes or no home at all…the few that do have families and the family finds that they're gay, they ex them completely" (*Paris is Burning*). This crisis can be compared to the convergence of "personal and civilizational liminality" (Thomassen 50), as the children go through a dual transitional stage (puberty, recognizing LGBTQ+ identity) at the same time they are cast out of their support structures and forced to confront systemic discrimination, violence, poverty, and disease in society. Ball culture's house system delivers members from this reality by inviting them into a new system of support, essentially restoring previous states of physical and emotional wellness.

Additionally, the healing of past trauma is another active form of restoration in ball's housing system. A child of the Xtravangaza house comments, "My birthday will come, and I'll always get a birthday gift from Angie [Xtravaganza, mother of the house of Xtravaganza]. Won't get one from my real mother" (*Paris is Burning*). As the house system restores formerly lost models of support, it provides members with the opportunity to mend their emotional wounds and overcome past trauma. This transformation is analogous to Maslow's notion, "transcendence of one's past," in which he explains that transcendence is "forgiving one's self because of understanding one's self," moving past feelings of "remorse, regret, guilt, shame, embarrassment," and embracing the past as part of one's existence (57-58). From this perspective, the house system functions as not only a model for transcending prior traumas and hardships, but for learning from those experiences and recognizing them as formative to the self.

Following "restoration" is the second logic of wellness: "enhancement." This refers to the strive to optimize oneself, to become "better than well" (Derkatch 134). This strive towards enhancement is evident in ball culture's house system, especially as mothers and fathers impart wisdom on their children so that they can better their lives amidst discouraging circumstances. House mother Angie Xtravaganza explains, "I always offer advice…as far as what I know and what I've been through in gay life and how to survive in gay world" (*Paris is Burning*). In addition to providing advice on living as a marginalized member of society, house mothers provided support in face of the HIV/AIDS crisis by taking young house members for testing, educating them on safe sex, and seeking medical care and support groups for house members living with HIV/AIDS (Arnold and Bailey 185). Essentially, house mothers taught members of ball culture how to not only survive, but to live as well as possible within the conditions of their reality and aspire for a life beyond it. Systematically structured, houses functioned as a resource

for survival as ball members, especially children, negotiated their "sexual identities, social and sexual relationships, and their economic circumstances and opportunities" (Arnold and Bailey 186). By providing kinship, education, and social support, houses restored and enhanced the ball community's quality of life, leaving a significant impact on their perception and experience of wellness.

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow:" The Affective Experience of Ball

In analyzing ballroom spaces, rituals, and house/family structures, it is evident that the affective experience of ball culture has the potential to bring about transformation within its community members. Rill explains that this transformative potential can be conceptualized as a "ritual healing process," in which the experience of an ideal or fantasy produces a lasting effect that can be carried "back into the external social world" (655). From this perspective, ball culture can be understood as a form of ritual healing, transforming members' feelings of isolation and precarity into a stable sense of validation, acceptance, and safety. However, Rill notes that these sentiments are not so easily transferred to the structured world that members return to, explaining that there's often "disappointment that the ideal cannot be sustained" (Rill 657). Unfortunately, this is generally the case in ball culture, evident as Angie Xtravaganza laments the death of her house daughter, the confident and fierce Venus Xtravanza, claiming that she was "too wild with people in the streets" and after four days of being missing, NYPD found her "strangled under a bed in a sleazy hotel in New York City" (*Paris is Burning*). While the fantasy of free expression, acceptance of diversity, and unity was enacted as an embodied ideal in the ballroom, it was not achievable in realistic social spheres.

However, this is not to dismiss or downplay ball culture's role in developing these ideals, validating convention-defying identities, and enabling their survival. Ott and Herman suggest

that the liberating potential of resistance "lies not in its capacity to alter the prevailing social structure permanently, but in the capacity of cultural consumers to make do—to use the resources of the dominant economic order to invent their own meanings and pleasures" (Ott & Herman 265). From this perspective, ball culture is valuable because it enables spaces and moments of creativity, pleasure, validation, and reprieve from social structure. In *Paris is Burning's* post-credit scene, Dorian Corey admits, "Everybody wants to leave something behind them, some impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think, you've left a mark on the world… if you just get through it… and a few people remember your name. Then you've left a mark. You don't have to bend the whole world. I think it's better to just enjoy it. Pay your dues… and enjoy it." While there is an element of seeming exhaustion in this testimony, it emphasizes an attitude of acceptance and attainment, one of "non-striving, non-wishing" (Maslow 63).

Though ball culture may not have had the capacity to restructure the ideologies which degraded and diminished LGBTQ+ identity, the fact that it functioned as a reprieve from those ideologies is transformative in and of itself. Berlant argues that making a life for oneself is "not usually a project of making oneself or the world better, but instead involves attention to making a less bad experience: a reprieve" (Berlant 35). She also highlights the importance of "self-interruption" and "experiences of coasting" to the will for survival (34). As Dorian Corey signs off Livingston's documentary with the advice to simply "enjoy it," the importance of interruptive episodes from daily life becomes clear. Ball culture is transformative because it is a reprieve, and through the interruption of structures, even if momentary, the ball community cultivated the spirit of resilience and survival within an environment that systematically discouraged it.

In examining motifs of transcendence in ballroom culture, it is evident that ball established a model of exploration, transgression, and ultimately, survival for the marginalized

at-risk LGBTQ+ community navigating New York City in the 80s. Ballrooms and houses not only existed as moments/spaces where members of the community could negotiate their identities amongst a group of accepting peers, but they served to foster wellness and resilience within a group of people experiencing unprecedented hardship. Whether the transcendence into an ideal realm of acceptance and unity, or transformation into an ideal identity took place or not for members of ball culture, its value as a reprieve is critical. Through pursuits of self-interruption and engagement with ideals of gender, class, and status, the ball community transgressed the reality which unrelentingly diminished their existence and learned how to survive.

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